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ABSTRACT

R. Hart and D. Burks (1972) indicated that rhetorical sensitivity (RS) is a cognitive orientation to communication competence that stresses the importance of appropriate adaptation and flexibility in interpersonal communication interactions. In 1980, Hart, Carlson and Eadie developed an instrument called RHETSEN scale, a 40-item questionnaire. The instrument focused on encoding spoken messages and consists of three dimensions: Rhetorical Sensitivity (RS); Noble Self (NS); and Rhetorical Reflector (RR). To simplify the process of doing research on RS, NS, and RR orientations toward communication, RHETSEN2 was developed by Eadie and Powell. A cover letter and two versions of RHETSEN2 were sent to 150 randomly selected University of Minnesota faculty members. Instructions were developed and the instrument was revised to determine how gender groups, age groups, and educator groups felt about communicating with students (formal context) and a friend (informal context). The mean results indicate that the RS variable was rated the highest in both formal and informal contexts. Significant differences occurred between gender groups in rating RS for both the formal and informal contexts. Marginal differences occurred between different age groups and different faculty ranks (professor, associate, assistant). If limited differences were evident then between the various groups studied, some differences merit mention. For example young, female, assistant professors had higher RS and RR scores than other groups. Also, younger faculty members also have higher NS and RR scores. (Contains three tables of data.) (TB)

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# An Exploratory Study of Faculty Members' Perceptions of Their Rhetorical Sensitivity In Informal and Formal Communication Situations

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on faculty members' perceptions of their Rhetorical Sensitivity, Noble Self, and Rhetorical Reflector using the RHETSEN2 instrument. The results indicate that the RS variable was rated the highest in both formal and informal communication situations. Significant differences occurred between gender groups on the RS variable. The correlation analysis reveals that significant relationships exist between RS with students and all other variables. Other results are reported and discussed in this paper.

Hart and Burks (1972) indicated that rhetorical sensitivity (RS) is a cognitive orientation to communication competence which stresses the importance of appropriate adaptation and flexibility in interpersonal communication interactions. They described the rhetorical sensitive person as one who does the following:

1. tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition,
2. attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior,
3. is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation,
4. seeks to distinguish between all information acceptable for communication,
5. tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform ways.

Hart and Burks theorized that learning to adapt communication behavior to a specific situation with others is a significant part of the social enculturation process. In addition, they described RS as a balance point between the tensions of adaptation to any communication event described by others rhetorical reflection (RS) and resisting adaptation during the communication event noble self (NS).

In 1980 Hart, Carlson, and Eadie developed an instrument called RHETSEN scale, a 40-item questionnaire. The instrument focused on encoding spoken messages and consists of three dimensions:

1. Rhetorical Sensitivity (RS)-- Persons who score high on this scale avoid communication rigidity, accept personal complexity, appreciate the communication of ideas, and accept creativity.
2. Noble Self (NS)-- Persons who score high on the scale tend to believe that total frankness and personal consistency are essential to good communication.
3. Rhetorical Reflector (RR)-- Persons who score high on this scale tend to believe that the satisfaction of others' needs is a primary goal of communication.

They reported that RS scores were correlated negatively with both NS and RR scores, while NS and RR scores were uncorrelated. They also indicated that males are more likely to have higher RS scores than female, while females have higher RR scores and that NS were not distinguished by gender. Hart et al also concluded that the RHETSEN instrument measures an orientation to communication that might be described as favoring persons who are white, male, richer rather than poorer, from a professional rather than laboring class, low in ethnic identification, and Republican or independent in political affiliation. More research is need to support the conclusion that they generated in the study.

Eadie and Paulson (1984) reported that NS "were rated as being more impressive leaving, dominant, and less friendly than the other two and that rhetorical sensitives and rhetorical reflectors were distinguished from each other in terms of degrees of perceived competence among situations and in terms of the style variables that

were seen as contributing to perceptions of communication competence. They also concluded that the rhetorical sensitive construct "has the potential to explain differences in behavior across situations and appear to fit appropriately among an array of attributes subsumed by the construct communication competence." Although the Hart and Burke instrument was developed in 1972, limited research has been reported and, according to Ting-Toomey (1988), no cross cultural research has been completed. Eadie and Powell (1991) reported that the dearth of research testing stems from the validity of the RHETSEN instrument. That is, subjects tend to respond to the middle position on a five-point Likert scale continuum and the instrument also is difficult to score. As a result, Eadie and Powell developed RHETSEN2. It measures, RS, NS, and RR, were developed to simplify the process of doing research on these individual orientations toward communication. They concluded RHETSEN2 appears to measure the rhetorical sensitive orientation in a manner superior to the versions of the scale. The specific of the instrument will be discussed under *procedures*.

Alspach (1992) pointed out that RHETSEN instrument attempts to measure communication flexibility and adaptation in general context. She concluded that the rhetorically sensitive communicators should distinguish between informal situations where spontaneous expressions are made and formal situations in which instrumental communication are more valued. Thus, RHETSEN scale would vary if the situational context were defined as either formal (e.g. a school or business setting) or informal (e.g. a setting with friends or family)

Alspach's research focused on formal and informal situations. The following results occurred in her study:

1. Subjects reported higher rhetorical reflector scores for informal contexts and higher noble self scores for formal contexts.
2. Females produced lower rhetorical reflector scores in both informal and formal context and higher noble self scores in formal contextual condition.
3. RS did not vary according to educational levels across contexts.
4. High school students scored highest on RR and NS on both informal and formal contexts.
5. For age groups the 23-30 years group scored highest on RS on both contexts, as well as formal context for RR. The 15-18 year group scored highest on the RR for informal context and the 19-22 year group scored highest on the NS for both contexts.

The results of Alspach's exploratory study with RHETSEN2 provided a clear picture of the utility of the instrument. She asserts that the "attractiveness of rhetorical sensitivity as a correlate to communication competence is brightened by the introduction of instrumentation which is easy to use and heuristically powerful." The potential weakness of her study is the subject pool as no specifics are given about the participants. In addition, no information is provided on instructions to participants.

Thus, in this present study instructions were developed and the instrument was revised to determine how gender groups, age groups, and educator groups felt about communicating with students (formal context) and a friend (informal context). Specific research questions are presented below:

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Will there be significant differences among faculty rank groups (Full, Associate, Assistant) in rating the RHETSEN2 variable scores (RS, RR, NS) of students and friends?
2. Will there be significant differences between gender groups (male and female) in rating RHETSEN2 variable scores (RS,RR, NS) of students and friends?
3. Will there be significant differences among age groups (25-39, 40-49, 50-over) in rating RHETSEN2 variable scores (RS, RR, NS) of students and friends?
4. What are the relationships among RS, RR, and NS for informal and formal situations?

## PROCEDURES

A cover letter and two versions of RHETSEN2 instrument were sent to a random sample of 150 faculty members at the University of Minnesota. Specifically, the materials were packaged and taken to Central Mailing. A random list of faculty members were generated and labels were printed. Even though there are three

times as many male as female professors, 75 male and 75 female professors were selected for the study. The labels were attached to the materials and sent to the faculty members.

*Instrument*

Eadie and Powell (1991) wrote forty-five Likert-type items, fifteen for each of the three orientations, RS, NS, and RR. Three judges evaluated the items and made suggestions for improvement. Initially, 454 college students enrolled in speech communication classes at two Western universities rated the items. Scale validation was pursued by 1) insuring adequate reliability of the final version of the scale, 2) performing factor analysis on the final version of the scale, and 3) correlating the scale with other established measures of communication orientations. Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the final instrument were as follows: RS=.84, NS= .74, and RR= .79. Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded controlled for 34% of the variance. Thirty items loaded on one of the dimensions.

When correlating the results with other instruments the following results occurred:

> NS correlated positively with argumentativeness.
>
> RS and NS correlated negatively with communication apprehension.

RS and NS correlated positively with interaction involvement.

RS and NS correlated positively with conventional sensitivity.

RS, NS, and RR correlated positively with their counterparts of the old version of the RHETSEN scale.

*Statistical Analysis*

Pearson Correlation coefficients and ANOVA were completed on the data.

RESULTS

The mean results, presented in Table 1, indicate that the the RS variable was rated the highest in both formal and informal contests. As reported in Table 2 significant differences ($p < .01$) occurred between gender groups in rating RS for both the formal and informal contexts. Marginal differences occurred between age groups and faculty rank groups. The differences will be presented in the next section. The correlational analysis reveals that significant relationships ($p < .001$) exist between RS with students and all other variables, NS with students and all RHETSEN2 friend variables, RR with students and and RS(F) and RR(F), and RS with friends and NS(F) and RR(F).

DISCUSSION

An interpretation of the results indicate that limited significant differences occurred between levels of the independent variables and the dependent measures. There are, however, some differences that merit mentioning. For example, young, female, assistant professors had higher RS and RR scores than other groups. The grand mean for this group is 41, whereas the grand mean other combination is below 40. Given the limited number of subjects a three-way ANOVA would be meaningless, but intuitively this group appears to avoid communication rigidity, accepts personal complexity, appreciates the communication of ideas, is creative and accepts others' ideas. This is true when communicating with students as well as friends. In other words the person is more open-minded and is willing to adapt to various situations.

Other results indicate that younger faculty members also have higher NS scores. For example the mean for young faculty members is 29.33, while the mean for the middle and older faculty members is 26+ ($p < .10$). Overall, young faculty members have higher RR scores. This means that members are concerned about the satisfaction of others during formal and informal communication situations.

Other results, reported in Table 2, indicate that females have significantly higher RS scores for both formal and informal situations. In addition they have higher NS scores than males for both situations ($p < .20$). Although the differences are marginal, there are not large standard deviations. Thus, gender appear to be a significant variable

in terms of showing differences on NS. This means that females are more concerned about frankness and personal consistency.

In contrast, when comparing the gender results of this study with the gender results of Alspach's study, faculty members have higher RS scores, but lower NS and RR scores than samples used in her study.

This seems to mean that faculty members are more open-minded, but not as concerned about the feelings of others.

Other results indicate that assistant professors have higher RS and NS scores than other faculty rank groups and the lowest RR scores. The results reinforce the age results. That is, assistant professors are more open-minded and frank when deal with others in interactional formal and informal situations.

The correlational results reveal that there is a .81 correlation between RS formal and RS informal scores. This seem to indicate that faculty members have consistent behavior in their interactions with others. The correlation between NS formal and informal scores is .71 which account for about 50 percent of the variance. In both situations females have higher scores than males. The relationship between RR student and RR friend is .63 which account for only 36% of the variance. The mean for friend is 4-points higher than for students. Post hoc analysis reveals that faculty members have significantly higher scores ( $p < .01$) for the two situations. This indicates that pleasing a friend is more important than pleasing a student.

Alspach points out that RHETSEN2 is an excellent instrument to use as a class exercise. The instrument has been used in various communication classes including introductory communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication and advanced communication theory. The results can be reported to students to initiate discussion of adaptation as a mark of communication competence and help to reveal a link between rhetorical and scientific perspectives of communication.
Likewise, exploratory research can be done in a variety of businesses and industries to identify the similarities and differences of people of different professions on RHETSEN2, as well as other standardized communication instruments. For example, these research questions might be addressed:

1.What are the relationships between RHETSEN2 variables and PRCA-24 variables?
2. What are the relationships between RHETSEN2 variables and Communication Style Variables?
3. What is the relationship between composite RHETSEN2 score and composite Communication Competence scores?

Other questions also might be addressed. For example, Hayes ( 1987) stated: Is the ideal person one who is Rhetorically Sensitive as defined by the RHETSEN instrument? Or should the ideal be a Noble Self or a Rhetorical Reflector or some particular combination of RS, NS

and RR scores? Could scores on the RHETSEN2 be used to predict success of people in different professions? Could workshops be developed to change attitude and behaviors of members of target groups?

In sum the results of this study indicate that faculty members, whether communicating with students or friends, have high RS scores, while the other scores are below 3 on average on a 5-point scale. More research is needed to understand the construct of RHETSEN2 and it utility in the applied communication arena.

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Table 1

Means for Rhetsen Variables
in rating Students and Friends

| Individuals | Factors | Means |
|---|---|---|
| STUDENTS | Rhetorical Sensitive | 39.01 |
| | Noble Self | 27.08 |
| | Rhetorical Reflector | 23.13 |
| FRIENDS | Rhetorical Sensitive | 39.77 |
| | Noble Self | 26.52 |
| | Rhetorical Reflector | 27.05 |

Table 2

Significant ANOVA for Rhetsen Variables

| IV | DV | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Rhetorical Sensitive (Students) | 5.653 | .01 |
| | Rhetorical Sensitive (Friends) | 7.949 | .001 |

Table 3
Correlation among Rhetsen Variables
for Students and Friends

| IV | RS(S) | NS(S) | RR(S) | RS(F) | NS(F) | RR(F) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RS(S) | | .37* | -.32* | .81* | .35* | -.32* |
| NS(S) | | | -.17 | .42* | .71* | -.17 |
| RR(S) | | | | -.32* | .03 | .63* |
| RS(F) | | | | | .33* | -.44* |
| NS(F) | | | | | | -.10 |
| RR(F) | | | | | | |

*P < .001